Virginia Cooperative Extension

Carpenter Ants

ENTOMOLOGY FACT SHEET

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CARPENTER ANTS

Ants of the genus *Camponotus* are known as carpenter ants because they build their colonies in large galleries excavated in wood. These ants are large (from 1/4 inch to 3/4 inch), and are black or sometimes red and black. Under natural conditions, carpenter ants nest in live and dead trees, and in rotting logs and stumps. However, they will also construct their nests in houses, telephone poles, and other man-made wooden structures.

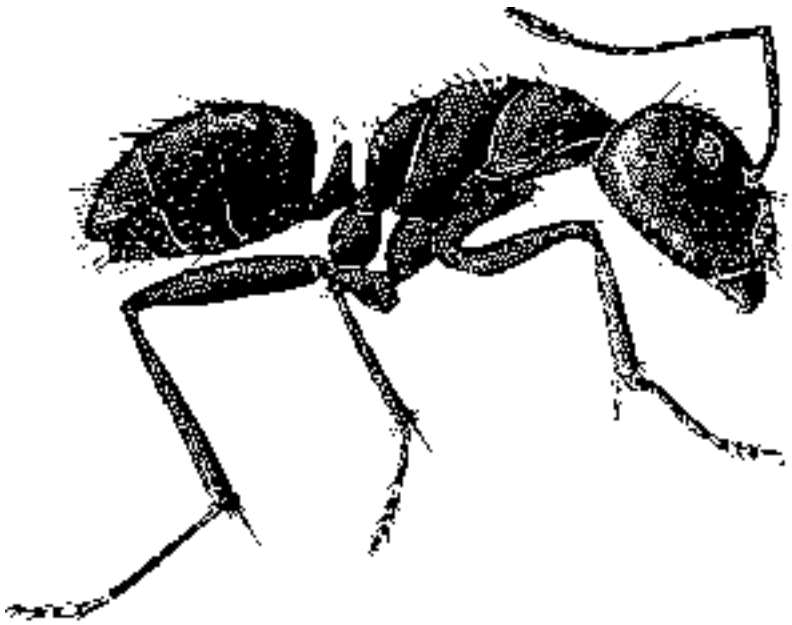
Carpenter ants rarely cause structural damage to buildings. Although most carpenter ant damage is cosmetic, the ants are considered serious pests by homeowners because they forage for food inside houses. The natural food of these ants consists of honeydew from aphids, other insects, and plant juices, but they will readily forage for water and food scraps within the home.

LIFE CYCLE

Colonies of carpenter ants are often long-lived. Each colony is founded by a single fertilized queen. A colony does not reach maturity and become capable of producing young queens and males, until it contains 2000 or more workers. It may take a colony from three to six years to reach this stage. Each year thereafter, the colony will continue to produce winged queens and males, which leave the nest and conduct mating flights from May through July.

Nests are usually begun in wood that has been exposed to and damaged by moisture. Carpenter ants will often extend the nest into adjacent, sound wood. Around houses, the nests are commonly found in porch pillars and roofs, window sills, and wood in contact with soil. Carpenter ants do not eat the wood they remove during their nest-building activities, but deposit it inside the nest or in small piles outside entrances to the nest. The galleries of carpenter ants are kept smooth and clean, and they are not lined with soil as are the galleries of termites.

When homeowners notice carpenter ants active in their house during the winter months, January through March, it usually means that the nest is located within the house. When carpenter ants are noticed in the house (usually around the dishwasher!) in the spring, April through June, it is an indication that the nest is probably outside the house. In this case, the ants are simply including the house in their normal food-foraging zone--which may be very large. Activity in the late spring should prompt homeowners to inspect the firewood pile for decayed logs or a tree that is partially decayed; these are locations that might harbor a carpenter ant nest.



Note: There are several species of ants that commonly occur around structures. Homeowners should have ants identified before assuming that those found around the house are carpenter ants!

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CONTROL

NON-CHEMICAL. Control of carpenter ants must begin with locating the nest. A complete review of the actual or potential moisture problems of a structure can help to locate carpenter ant nests. Inspect downspouts and gutters, the roof, the flashing around pipes and the chimney, and the collection of rainwater on porches, especially around pillars. If moisture-damaged wood is found, it may indicate the location of a carpenter ant nest. Correct the moisture, and replace all moisture-damaged wood. In addition to the inspection, be certain that limbs from trees close to the house do not contact the roof. Carpenter ants can gain access to houses from adjacent trees.

CHEMICAL. Control of carpenter ants must begin with the location of the nest. Contacting a professional pest control operator to treat areas around the outside of the house or the inside of the house--without locating the nest--may not solve the problem. Once the nest is located, any of the common liquid or aerosol household insecticides can be used to kill the ants. The spray should be directed at the nest; there is no need for a broadcast insecticide treatment to walls and floors.

For chemical control, use one of the following:

carbaryl (Sevin) - outdoor use only

chlorpyrifos (Dursban)

diazinon (Spectracide)

propoxur (Baygon)

Follow the specific mixing, application, and disposal directions on the insecticide label. Persons applying insecticides indoors should consider the short-term odor of some of them.

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